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ABSTRACT

This study examined the views of parents and educators from kindergarten programs in Canada on ideal kindergarten practice. Data sources included focus groups of parents and educators, surveys of educators in three Canadian provinces, surveys of teachers nominated as having exemplary programs, surveys of parents from these programs, and in-depth case studies of some of these exemplary programs and of other kindergarten classrooms. The findings indicated that parents and educators in the sample agreed on the efficacy of child-centered, play-based practice, although parents did place more emphasis on academics than educators. They also agreed that parent-teacher communication is crucial. The study also found that although exemplary and other programs had similar forms of parental involvement, exemplary teachers valued involvement somewhat more that other teachers. Although considerable common ground was found between parents and educators, active and regular parental involvement was not a feature of most programs. (Contains six references.) (MDM)

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PARENT PERSPECTIVES AND PARTICIPATION IN EXEMPLARY KINDERGARTEN PRACTICE

Poster/Paper presented at the Annual Meetings of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, April, 1995

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ABSTRACT

Parents views on ideal kindergarten practice and their participation in exemplary kindergarten programs were examined and compared with the views of educators. Data sources were: focus groups of parents and of educators, surveys of educators in 3 Canadian provinces, surveys of teachers nominated as having exemplary programs, surveys of parents from these programs, and in-depth case studies of some of these programs and of other kindergarten classrooms. The findings show that parents in this sample and educators agree on child-centered, play-based practice, although parents place more emphasis on academics. They also agree that parent-teacher communication is crucial, but more active involvement is not. Exemplary and other programs have similar forms of parental involvement, but exemplary teachers value involvement somewhat more. Both exemplary and other teachers report setting goals for individual children based on parental/home factors, often in a way that complements or compensates for parental factors. Although considerable common ground was found between parents and educators, active and regular parental involvement was not a feature of most programs.

BACKGROUND

Active roles for parents in the education of children are prescribed in many of the effective preschool intervention programs, as well as in visions of school reform for older children. Partnerships require understanding of parents' perspectives as well as attempts to foster participation.

It has long been an article of faith that parents can help to prepare young children for school by providing a stimulating environment during the preschool years and a secure social-emotional foundation for adapting to the transition to school. More recently, it has been proposed that parental beliefs about schooling may also affect children's initial attitudes and understanding as they adapt to school (Pelletier, 1994).

Depending on their own beliefs, and opportunities afforded by the educational system, parents can also participate in a variety of ways once their children enter school. These include: sharing in the development and implementation of school policy; contributing to efforts to help their children learn; advocating on behalf of their child or a particular group of children; assisting in the support of their school; and participating in parent education and support programs (Jackson, Davies, Cooper, & Page, 1988). Each of these forms of involvement can have significant impact on children. In their review of compensatory education programs, Stallings and Stipek (1986) found that parents and school personnel worked closely together in successful programs and that parents were guided to interact with their children in ways that promoted learning. Other studies have shown that parents can contribute to their child's learning by fostering the development of skills being acquired at school. For example, it was found that the language skills of young children improved if they read aloud to their parents (Tizard, Schofield, & Henison, 1982).

Cross-cultural research (Stevenson, Lee, Chen, Stigler, Hsu, & Kitamura, 1990) further emphasizes the importance of parents in their children's education. This research suggests that children are more likely to progress in school when parents take education seriously, are able to realistically appraise their child's abilities, and have high though realistic expectations for their children.

AIMS

This report describes parents' perceptions of, and participation in, kindergarten practice. It considers the perspectives of parents and educators by analyzing several data sources: Focus groups of parents and of educators, a large general survey of educators in three Canadian provinces, a smaller survey sample of teachers having programs nominated as "exemplary", surveys of parents in these programs, intensive case studies of some of these programs,including teacher interviews, and a set of case studies of other kindergarten programs. These data sets were used to explore a number of questions:

1. Do parents and educators have different views on ideal kindergarten practice?

2. How do educators view parents' roles in kindergarten?

3. Do exemplary teachers differ from others in their views on parents and in their actual programs?

4. How do parents describe their participation in, and satisfaction with, exemplary programs?

METHODS

The Ontario Exemplary Kindergarten Study (Corter & Park, 1993) established a multifaceted data base on exemplary kindergarten practice. Reviews of the literature and focus groups with kindergarten stakeholders were used to generate questionnaires to explore stakeholder views on practice. Over 400 randomly selected educators in three provinces, including kindergarten teachers and early childhood consultants, completed the questionnaires. Consultants also nominated exemplary kindergarten programs. In these programs, teachers (N=44) and parents (N=150) also provided questionnaire reports. In addition, 5 of the 20 exemplary programs were selected for in-depth case study which included interviews with teachers, children, and principals; direct observation of classroom interactions; and other kinds of information-gathering such as examination of teachers' lesson planning. In an extension of the study, 20 case studies were carried out in kindergarten programs that had not been identified as exemplary (Pelletier, 1994). One additional case study was also carried out in a kindergarten classroom with a intervention program which included parent education.

RESULTS

Views of Parents and Educators on Ideal Kindergarten Practice

In survey results regarding goals of the ideal kindergarten, parents and educators generally agreed in rank ordering different goals, although parents ranked academic preparation and motivation to learn as somewhat more important and teachers ranked self-worth and language development as somewhat more important (see graph).

In focus groups there was considerable overlap in views, but some dissatisfaction over academics on the part of parents. (see below).

P(arent) • I think at that age, for kids who are that little, the importance of the teacher is about 150%. Kids at that age sense who wants to be with them and who doesn't want to be...
P • We are so lucky...she's the grandmotherly type...who will hug you and comfort you but you

obey her rules.
P • It depends on the teacher. Some are really believers in learning letters and some say no. Personally, I'd like to see them learn their letters so it's not such a shock in Grade 1.
P • I think they should be in a smaller class, 25 is too big for a teacher to observe...there are going to be children who are going to go through the system and who are going to be missed, who are very quiet, or not going to read...
E(ducator) • We give children experience in a way that the children can learn, so we use the experience of play to teach.

Focus Group Views on the Relative Importance of Parent Participation

In the focus groups, involvement was seen as important but differences existed in ideas about what involvement should be. Communication with parents includes informal opportunities for parent education. In-class parent observation or participation was uniformly lauded by teachers who do use it, and by parents, but not by teachers who don't.(see comments).

E • Parents' concerns can be a problem ...You have to explain good primary philosophy. You explain individual differences even within grade level and you need to educate parents.
E • Parents are very insecure. I taught in a pod, anything different made them nervous.
E • We are having visits to our school. Parents are put to work delivering curriculum. It's the best way to educate parents.
E • We need information from parents too, because the K kids have no school records.
E • Every Thursday we make ourselves available to parents, sometimes there are organized talks, for eg. about children's books, or discipline.
P • When I was looking at this school for my son I purposely called the principal and asked her about coming in ... I just pushed. I told myself, I am a client and you are a service and I want to see what's happening in the school.
P • ...Some days we can go in and observe the children in the classroom, some days we can talk to a school psychologist who speaks about issues that parents themselves have brought up.

Educator Survey Views on the Relative Importance of Parent Participation

General Survey: Although all educators say that parent communication is important, the surveys suggest that parent involvement is less important than some other features of kindergarten. When forced to rank order eight potentially distinguishing characteristics of exemplary kindergarten programs, teachers ranked "strong parental involvement" as "least important"

Educators were also asked to rate parents and other stakeholders in terms of their importance in setting the goals of the kindergarten class from "a great deal" to "none". In this rating, parents were in the middle ground with 39% of teachers assigning "a great deal" of importance to their input. "A great deal" of importance was assigned more often to teachers themselves (88%) and to children (73%). Other stakeholders who were mentioned less often than parents in this regard were principals (29%), school boards (24%), provincial education ministries (21%), and the local communities (14%).

Exemplary Teacher Surveys. The survey results on parent participation were generally similar for the national survey of teachers and for those teachers nominated as exemplary. The major difference was that exemplary teachers rated strong parent involvement as more important among a list of features of practice (see graph)

Forms of Parental Participation: Educators' Views & Parents' Reports.

Almost all educators rated "communication" with the teacher as "very important", and almost all parents reported having talked with the teacher about their child at least once. However, most parents (56%) did so less than once a month. Almost all teachers (88%) also rate the parents' "supporting the work of the school at home" as "very important", and 59 % of parents report encouragement from the teacher to do so, most often by "reading". In contrast, a minority of educators rank participating in the classroom as "very important" either by observing ones child (32%) or assisting the teacher (22%); interestingly, a majority of the parents (68%) had observed their children in the classroom and a sizeable minority had assisted in the classroom (43.8%). Although this suggests a relatively active role for these parents whose children were in programs nominated as exemplary, most forms of involvement occurred less than once a month. The only exceptions were "dropping off/picking up child at class" (70% did so once a month or more) and "talking with child about kindergarten" (95% did so once a week or more).

In terms of parents' satisfaction with their children's progress in kindergarten, a clear majority were satisfied with progress in all areas. Nevertheless, differences in satisfaction across areas did exist. For example, the highest levels of satisfaction were felt towards peer adjustment (91%) and the lowest towards academic preparation (68%).

Differences in Parents' Surveys by SES, Visible Minority Status, and Language

The variables of SES and Visible Minority Status made little difference in parents' views on exemplary kindergarten practice, in reports of parent involvement, or in satisfaction with child's progress. Lower SES parents placed slightly less emphasis on developing self worth as a goal of the kindergarten. Visible minority parents placed more emphasis on the goals of language and values development and were slightly less satisfied with their children's language development. Language (French vs. English Schools) had somewhat more impact. Parents in English schools placed more emphasis on having fun and on the development of self-worth. Parents in French schools reported less active contact with the kindergarten program (home visits, classroom visits, and talking with the teacher), and they reported somewhat less satisfaction with their children's learning of routines.

Case Studies: The Role of Parents in Teachers' Programs

The forms of direct participation were similar in exemplary programs and other programs. For example, about half of teachers reported the use of at least some parents as classroom assistants, and somewhat more than half used parents to help in special events such as concerts. Fewer than 20% employed classroom observation as a parent education technique, although about half reported using talk with parents as an education technique.

Parents played an important indirect role in the way teachers set goals for children in their programs. 92% of teachers reported setting goals for individual children partly on the basis of parent factors (characteristics, wishes, etc). This practice applied to about 50% of individual children. For these children, about half of the goals were based on the teachers' compensation for parental characteristics ("parents push academics, so I work on self confidence"; "parents low in language...") and about half were based on consistency with parental factors. Exemplary teachers were somewhat more likely to use compensation for individuals and they were also more likely to mention a community compensation perspective.

SUMMARY

• **Parents' and educators' views on exemplary kindergarten practice**, in both focus groups and surveys, overlapped considerably with the views of educators. Both parents and teachers regard teacher qualities as the key to good practice, and parents understand that play is an effective means to foster development.

• Nevertheless, parents place somewhat more emphasis on academic preparation, and they are less satisfied with academic preparation than they are with other areas of child development in classrooms regarded as exemplary by educators.

• Parents' views on exemplary kindergarten practice differ only modestly according to socioeconomic status and visible minority status. Parents from visible minorities place more emphasis on the development of language and values; higher SES parents place more emphasis on the development of self-worth.

• **Parent Participation and the role of parents** is a motivating issue for both teachers and parents as seen in relatively unguided focus group discussions.

• Both the focus groups and surveys showed that educators unanimously endorse good communication and parent support of the school program at home, but differences of opinion exist on the degree of active participation. In surveys, a minority of teachers believe that it is very important to have parents present in the classroom to observe or assist or that it is very important to have parental input in setting the goals of the classroom.

• Teachers nominated as exemplary place somewhat more emphasis on parental involvement than do other teachers.

• Parents' reports of actual participation in exemplary kindergartens correspond to educators' relative enthusiasm for various forms of parental involvement: All reported communication with the teacher, and most reported encouragement to extend education to the home, as well as having observed in the classroom. Even so, contact usually occurred less than once a month.

• Parents' preparation for/ participation in exemplary classrooms did not differ according to socioeconomic or visible minority status. Differences were found according to the language of the school (French or English), with more active involvement being reported in English schools.

• Teachers in both exemplary and other programs include parents in a variety of ways and to varying degrees. Some use communication for reassuring parents, others as a means for parent education in ways to understand and deal with children's needs. Almost all teachers set goals for at least some individual children partly on the basis of parental factors, sometimes complementing or compensating for factors in the home.

CONCLUSION

Educators in this study believed that parent communication is crucial to good kindergarten practice but more active parental involvement is not as important. Teachers nominated as exemplary saw parental involvement as somewhat more important and in more of a "systems" perspective. However, their programs did not include unusual parent participation features. Nevertheless, parents in these programs shared many of the philosophical assumptions of educators and were generally happy with their children's development, but were somewhat concerned with academic preparation. Case studies revealed that teachers have many different approaches to parent involvement and that most teachers are sensitive to parental factors in setting goals for individual children, often doing so to compensate or complement parental factors. Although the literature supports the value of parent participation in early education and although kindergarten teachers are concerned about parents' roles, it appears that active, regular parent involvement in kindergarten requires system support from beyond the classroom.

Developing effective partnerships with parents as their children enter kindergarten can be an important part of constituency-building for education and an effective foundation for child development. Examining differences and searching for common ground in stakeholder views on exemplary practice, as was done in this study, can inform efforts to build partnerships. Despite general agreement on the importance of parents in kindergartens, there is considerable variability in the level and nature of parental participation, even in programs identified as exemplary.

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